Lungs

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Lungs

by StarlingBite

Summary

Jack Abbot stops breathing at exactly 8:52pm.

“Oh my God,” he hears someone exclaim, but he couldn’t tell you who.

As he takes in the figure on the gurney being wheeled into the ER, the IV in his arm, the blood in his hair, and the air being forced into his lungs every three seconds, Jack’s whole chest seizes up.

“It’s Doctor Robby,” One of the paramedics exclaims, like Jack can’t recognise him. Like they hadn’t kissed each other goodbye on the roof less than two hours ago.

Notes

Hope you enjoy. If you like it, come say hi to me on Tumblr at Starlingbite

The fic was inspired by the song Lungs by Ruti if want to listen to it whilst you read!

Many thanks to colt_14_21 on the Rabbot Hole Discord for checking it over before I posted!

So you might as well take my lungs away

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“It’s Doctor Robby,” One of the paramedics exclaims, like Jack can’t recognise him. Like they hadn’t kissed each other goodbye on the roof less than two hours ago.

A nurse deftly takes over from the paramedic, squeezing the bag providing oxygen to Robby’s unconscious body.

“What the hell happened?” Shen asks as he bursts into the room. Jack appreciates that he’s taking this seriously, especially when all Jack can do is stand there, at the edge of the room, watching his team work on Robby.

“Pedestrian versus auto,” The paramedic answers quickly, “He pushed a young girl out of the way of a van, took the brunt of it.”

Of course he fucking did.

“Alright, people, this is one of our own here, stay focused, no mistakes,” Shen orders. “Abbot, you with me?”

Jack’s eyes snap up as he hears his name. In all his years in the military and emergency rooms, he’s never frozen, not once. But all he can do is open his mouth, closing it again when no words come out.

He shouldn’t be in here. You’re not supposed to work on loved ones. Except no one in the hospital knows that Robby is Jack’s loved one. That Jack is Robby’s loved one. That *loved one* is too modest to describe what they are to each other.

They've kept it private far longer than most secrets last in a hospital full of gossips and glass walls.

Shen seems to get what Jack isn't saying and doesn't push him further. Jack thanks God that Shen knows what he's doing. He barks orders like he's been an attending for a decade, not less than a year. Ellis is there too, in sync with Shen, passing him instruments before he's even asked for them.

They work fast, but Jack only hears snippets of conversation.

"At least four broken ribs," he hears, followed by "..pneumothorax on the left side…he needs a CT like yesterday."

His eyes flick between Robby's unconscious body and the screen showing the slower-than-normal tics of his heart beating. He stares at it like he can force Robby's heart into a normal rhythm through sheer will.

"His sats are dropping, oxygen's at eighty-five percent."

"Shit, get me an intubation tray."

Jack's lungs burn as he watches Shen deftly angle the laryngoscope into Robby's open mouth and the ET tube forced down his throat. In a matter of moments, the tube is connected to a ventilator. Shen presses his stethoscope to Robby's chest, listening to check that he's inserted the tube correctly.

One, two, three seconds pass.

"It's in."

As soon as he's stable enough to be moved, the whole team is wheeling him out of the room, towards radiology.

Jack's still there, waiting for the moment he can breathe again.

He stares at the floor, his eyes unable to look away from the discarded medical equipment, Robby's blood.

"Abbot."

Shen's back, Jack didn't notice at first. He stands behind Jack, shifting his weight from one foot to the other awkwardly, like he doesn't know how to handle Jack in this state.

“He’s in good hands, I promise.”

Jack nods, silently.

“Is there anyone we should be calling? You aware if he has a healthcare proxy?”

“Yeah,” Jack’s eyes finally dart up to meet Shen’s. “Me.”

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At some point, Dana appears. Someone must have called her. She sits next to Jack in the break room. Jack doesn’t say anything.

You need to be able to breathe to speak.

Still, she makes sure he drinks some water, keeps him updated with what’s going on in that soft, gentle voice she uses for pediatric cases. She doesn’t seem surprised by Jack’s reaction or that he’s Robby’s medical proxy. If anyone was going to figure out what was going on between the two of them, it would be her. She sees everything.

An hour or two passes before Shen appears again. Robby is finally settled upstairs in the ICU he tells Jack. He’s still on a ventilator to give his battered lungs a rest. He’s stable, but they won’t know how bad the brain injury is for at least forty-eight hours. They’re worried about swelling on the brain so they have him in an induced coma, waiting to see if it will sort itself out on its own. If not, they’ll have to operate. If it comes to it, Jack will have to sign a piece of paper letting them drill into Robby’s skull.

That’s something to look forward to.

Dana asks Shen for the room number, and then she pulls Jack to his feet. He doesn’t remember much about the journey from the ER to the ICU floor. He knows people look up as he passes, their wide, sympathetic eyes following him. They all give him a wide berth like he’s fragile enough to explode at any moment.

Inside Robby’s room, someone has already installed a chair by the bed, like they knew he was coming. He sinks into it like his whole body is a lead weight, and he feels Dana’s hand come to rest on his shoulder as she stands over him.

“Ain’t right,” She mutters under her breath.

Robby looks small in the bed, and far too still. Jack watches his chest rise and fall steadily as oxygen is forced into his lungs. Jack could do with a ventilator right about now. He can’t remember what it feels like to breathe in.

Ignoring the way Dana watches every move he makes, he reaches out and slips his hand underneath Robby’s slack hand. They’re not the hand-holding type. He doesn’t reach out for Robby’s hand as they walk home from the grocery store. Robby doesn’t reach out and link their fingers together over the armrest at the cinema. Yet in this moment, it’s all Jack wants to do.

“You need me to call anyone? His family?”

Jack shakes his head. Robby’s parents are both dead, no siblings. He has a cousin he’s mentioned before, but Jack’s pretty sure they’re living in London and haven’t spoken in a while. The only family Robby has is him and Jake, and Jake still hasn’t talked to Robby since Pittfest.

“I’m going to have to drag you out of this room at some point, aren’t I?” Dana realises.

Jack has no plans to go anywhere.

She sighs.

“Alright, here’s the deal. I’ll talk to Gloria, get your shifts covered. You eat what I put in front of you, you’ll shower once a day, I will stay with Robby while you do, and I’ll see what I can do about digging out a lounger for you to sleep on.”

Jack wants to laugh out loud at the notion of sleep. Instead, he nods in agreement.

Dana stays for a little while longer, fussing with Robby’s IV line, tucking in his blanket a little tighter, and finding something comfortable for Jack to sleep on. Reluctantly, she leaves, knowing she has to be back at the hospital in a few hours for her shift. Jack doubts she’ll sleep any more than he will.

He’s not left alone for long after Dana leaves. Nurses come in to do checks every half an hour and just after midnight a doctor Jack doesn’t recognise comes and tries to explain the ventilator to Jack,

somehow not noticing the scrubs or the ID still fastened to the pocket.

In between visits, it's just him and Robby. Their hands still joined, resting against the bed.

"This wasn't what we agreed," He says, just as the clock nears two in the morning. It's the first thing he's said out loud in hours. "You promised I could go first."

Robby had thought he'd been joking at the time, just a few months into their relationship, but then he'd seen the resolute expression on Jack's face and his smile had faded away. It was late, the two of them crowded in Robby's tiny bathroom as they got ready for bed, Jack stood right behind Robby so they could both access the mirror above the sink. A toothbrush hung from Robby's mouth as their eyes met in the mirror. In the reflection, Robby's eyes softened as he realised what Jack was asking.

He'd lost someone he loved once already. He wasn't prepared to do it again. He wouldn't survive that.

It wasn't a promise Robby could realistically make, but he made it anyway. Removing the toothbrush, he turned around and promised, with minty breath, that Jack could go first. But; surprising Jack, he confidently added that he was sure that wasn't going to happen until they were very, *very* old, so there was nothing to worry about.

When he spun back around to spit and rinse, Jack leaned in to kiss his bare shoulder blade to show his gratitude.

"So you better fucking wake up, you hear me?"

At shift change, seven in the morning, a new nurse appears, bright-eyed and far too chipper. Jack is pretty sure he slept at some point, but it can't have been for long. His eyes burn, and his leg aches from nearly sixteen hours straight in his prosthetic.

Not long after she does her checks and leaves, Dana reappears, and she immediately pushes a warm container into his hands.

"Any change?"

Jack shakes his head.

"Well, better that than-"

She stops herself. They both know what the alternative is.

“I overheard Doctor Massey on the way in, sounds like they want to take him for another CT, see how the swelling is doing,” She informs him before looking down at him pointedly. “Eat that, we had an agreement.”

With a roll of his eyes, he opens the container and starts picking at the scrambled eggs and cubed potatoes. The eggs are pretty tasteless and the steam has made the potatoes go soggy, but Jack does his best to eat it all, despite not feeling particularly hungry.

“I’ve cleared everything with Gloria. Unless a mass casualty occurs, you won’t be required.”

“Thanks,” Jack responds through a mouthful of breakfast.

“And uh, I think some of the day shift might want to come see him.”

Her eyes flick over to Robby’s unconscious body for a split second. She tells him cautiously, like she’s worried he won’t be happy with others hanging around. Jack doesn’t give a fuck, and he tells her as much.

Dana is right about the CT scan. They come for Robby not long after she returns to the ER, while Jack waits in the room for him to return. He hates having Robby out of his sight for even a moment, but eventually he’s brought back and connected back up to all the wires and tubes keeping him alive.

An hour after that, Massey, the ICU chief, appears with an iPad and shows the latest scans to Jack.

“You see what I see?” Massey asks.

“Inflammation’s going down,” Jack replies. He can’t quite believe what he’s seeing. Robby is beating the odds.

“The drugs are working. We’ll do another scan in about twelve hours. If we see enough progress, we’ll start to bring him out of the coma.”

Jack nods. “Good.”

“You know he’s not out of the woods, right, Abbot?” Massey peers at him over his glasses. “There’s still the chance of permanent damage; we won’t know until he’s awake.”

“Yeah.” Jack bites out sharply, because he can’t think about that right

now.

Dana was also right about the day shift team wanting to check in on Robby. Throughout the day, different members pop up during their breaks. Mohan is the first one to appear, slipping through the door quietly.

“I’m not used to seeing him so quiet and still,” she comments.

“Me either.”

She stays for as long as possible and then slips back out as quietly as she came.

Mel appears next. Jack guesses she’s not a fan of the silence and fills it almost immediately with updates from the ER. Jack doesn’t care what’s happening two floors down but when he tears his eyes away from Robby to say just as much, he sees her standing at the end of the bed awkwardly. He notes the way she wrings her hands and chews her lip, and stops himself.

He forgets, sometimes, how much the junior staff look up to Robby. Jack is a fairly unknown entity to them until they've stuck around long enough to earn his respect. But Robby, they admire him from day one. They’re all lost without him.

McKay makes a brief appearance, getting paged back downstairs not long after she arrives. Whitaker spends the longest, though he never comes into the room. Jack sees him in the window with those wide, puppy eyes, peering through like he’s not sure he’s allowed to enter.

When Santos visits, it takes her no time at all to break the silence in the room.

“So, uh, you and the boss huh?”

Jack sends her a look.

“Yup, shutting up now,” she mimes zipping her lips shut, and she ducks out not long after.

Princess shows up at lunchtime, delivering another meal courtesy of Dana. It’s just a sandwich this time, turkey club, and Jack puts it to one side. What Dana doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

Hours pass with no visitors at all.

Those are the hours that drag on the longest.

He's counted all the ceiling tiles (fifty-seven), read the pile of two-year-old magazines cover to cover, and traced every line on Robby's hand until he has them memorised. There's a scar between Robby's thumb and index finger he's never noticed before. He makes a mental note to ask him about it when he's awake.

At the end of Dana's shift, she returns. She looks tired. The kind of tired that only comes from twelve hours in the Pitt. She's come via the cafeteria and is holding a tray with a bowl of lukewarm chilli and a bread roll.

"Eat it all, then go shower, you stink." She throws a bag onto the floor by his chair, "I got Jared in security to open your locker and retrieve your spare clothes. Give me your key, I'll pick up something fresh from your apartment on the way home."

"You don't have to do all this," Jack tells her.

She smiles at him, the kind you give to someone stupid. "Of course I do, hun." She nods her head in Robby's direction, "For him."

"When did you figure us out?"

"Oh, about five minutes after you two made it official. Robby couldn't stop smiling; it was *unnerving* to say the least."

Jack lets out an amused huff.

"Now you, you kept your cards closer to your chest, but then you started coming in for your shift twenty minutes early." She grins, "I honestly don't know how no one else spotted that."

"They're not you."

"I am one-of-a-kind," she agrees. "Now eat your dinner."

"Yes, ma'am."

He forces the chilli into his mouth, though he doesn't enjoy it. The food from the cafeteria is always undersalted and made with the cheapest meat available. With Dana standing over him, he has no choice but to eat it all. He even mops up the last of the chilli using the roll and swallows it down quickly.

The employee showers are in the basement, and it's the first time he's

left Robby's room in over twenty hours. Every step away from his room feels difficult, but he does what he's told because working on autopilot is all he can manage right now.

He hisses as he removes his prosthetic, followed by a wince as he takes in his swollen limb. He should have taken it off earlier, as he was sitting, but he was too focused on Robby to care about his own body. Now he'll need to borrow a pair of crutches until the swelling goes down. He sends a quick message to Dana, who promises to have someone bring him a pair while he's showering before climbing into the shower.

The water may wash away the grime from the last day, making him feel just a little more human, but he's far from the Jack Abbot who walked into the hospital early enough to meet Robby on the roof for a mind-meltingly good kiss. He wants to snap out of it, be the man who's not only good in a crisis, but is built for it. He never expected Robby to be his weakness, the thing that makes him freeze.

It's been too long since he last drew in a breath.

He needs to fucking snap out of it.

There are a pair of crutches waiting for him when he gets out of the shower. He dresses quickly, puts his leg in the bag and slowly makes his way back up to Robby's room.

There's a moment, before he enters, where he expects the worst. Maybe Robby's pressure has dropped, or they've had to rush him for emergency brain surgery when he was out. But Robby is exactly where Jack left him thirty minutes ago.

"Feel better?" Dana asks as he manoeuvres himself across the threshold. She quickly vacates the seat, and he immediately replaces her, resting the crutches against the side of the bed.

"Don't feel *worse* ," he replies with a shrug.

"You want me to stay?"

He considers it but shakes his head, "One of us should get a good night's sleep."

"Alright," She pats him on the shoulder. "Call if there's any change."

Time blurs after she leaves. Jack is too exhausted to even

acknowledge the nurses doing their checks. At around nine, he's taken back for his second scan, but Massey doesn't return with the scan results. That's either really good news or really bad news, Jack can't decide. All he cares about is slipping his hand back under Robby's the minute they bring him back.

At some point, he's not sure exactly when, his heavy head drops down onto the bed, and he finally falls asleep. He uses Robby's leg as a pillow, their hands still linked.

When he wakes up, it's light outside so he knows he's been asleep for a few hours. Whilst he feels better for having slept, his neck and back protest from being hunched over a bed all night.

It takes a moment for his mind to clear, for his brain to fully wake up, but the bleariness fades away and all he's left with is a hand squeezing his.

Jack's eyes snap to where their hands are connected, and there, right in front of him, he sees Robby's hand squeezing his. He can't quite believe it.

Slowly, because there's a possibility he's still asleep and dreaming all this, his eyes travel up the bed, up Robby's chest, and finally to his face.

Robby's eyes are open. Slightly unfocused, but open.

"Fucking hell, Mike," Jack croaks out. "Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand again."

Robby's hand squeezes his a third time.

Jack's heart thuds in his chest as he reaches across the bed to press the call button. A moment later, a nurse rushes in, sees Robby is awake, and tells Jack she'll go page Massey. All Jack can do is hold Robby's hand tightly. He's not going anywhere.

Robby's spare hand lifts up and taps the tube in his mouth.

"Soon," Jack promises, understanding Robby's hatred of the ventilator, still helping him breathe.

Doctor Massey appears less than five minutes after the nurse disappeared off to page him.

“Well, look who is back with us,” he says, checking Robby’s pupillary response. “The swelling in last night’s scan showed the inflammation was almost gone, so we started waking him up straight away.”

“Can we extubate?” Jack asks.

“We’ll wean him off the ventilator slowly, see how he’s breathing on his own, if his sats stay high enough, it can come out.”

“Now?” Jack presses.

Massey sends him an amused look. “Alright,” he agrees, then looks to Robby, “You ready Robby?”

Robby blinks. Massey reaches over and with a flick of a few buttons, the ventilator’s support is decreased by a third.

Jack stares at the screen, watching Robby’s oxygen saturation rate. It drops a little, though Jack expects that. After a moment, his sats hold steady.

“Looking good,” Massey seems pleased, too. “We’ll drop it down another third in about an hour, if that looks good, we should be able to extubate around lunchtime. How does that sound?”

Robby frowns.

“These things take time,” Massey pats Robby’s arm.

Jack isn’t sure who hates the next few hours more. Robby, who can’t speak, or him, having to sit in the uncomfortable plastic chair, trying to keep Robby entertained as he’s slowly weaned off the ventilator.

Dana makes an appearance mid-morning with breakfast for Jack. She slaps his shoulder when she arrives to find Robby’s eyes wide open.

“And when were you going to tell me?”

“I was a little busy Dana,” he argues.

Dana talks to Robby for a while whilst Jack eats, but then she’s needed back downstairs. She leaves, promising to tell everyone else the good news.

Finally, just after midday, Massey returns and lets the two of them know he’s confident the ventilator can be removed.

“Wanna help me out Abbot?” He asks, passing a pair of gloves over to Jack.

Between the two of them, they prepare Robby for extubation, disconnecting the tube from the machine.

“Breathe out,” Massey instructs, and then he’s pulling the tube cleanly from Robby’s throat. Robby coughs and splutters, his eyebrows furrowed. Jack can only imagine how uncomfortable it must feel. “Well done.”

Jack takes the nasal cannula and carefully fits it in place whilst Massey listens to Robby’s chest.

“Everything’s sounding good. I’m going to want to do some cognitive tests, check reflexes, but if everything goes okay, we might be able to move you out of the ICU before the end of the day.”

Robby licks his lips, and Jack suddenly notices how dry they look.

There’s a jug and an empty plastic cup on the table beside the bed, and Jack reaches for it without hesitation. He pours a small amount into the cup one-handed and brings it to Robby’s lips.

“Just a sip.”

Robby seems relieved after the cool water slips down his throat, helping to soothe his tender throat.

“Robby, do you know where you are?” Massey asks.

This is the moment, Jack realises, where he discovers what kind of damage that van did to Robby’s brain. This is the moment he’ll learn if his partner has the chance of ever practising medicine ever again.

Robby’s voice is hoarse as he speaks, the volume barely a whisper. But Jack hears it loud and clear.

“PT…MC.”

“And the year?”

“Twenty..six.”

“Good job. Who’s that standing by your bed?”

Robby’s eyes flick to him and they soften, just a little. “ *Jack.* ”

Jack has never loved the sound of his own name more than in this moment.

Massey asks a few more questions that Robby answers with ease. He passes the reflex tests with flying colours too.

“He’s improving quickly,” Massey tells Jack afterwards as he’s on the way out the door, “He’s very lucky.”

Jack feels like the lucky one.

There are still more tests to do. More hoops to jump through and patience to hold on to until Robby is, fingers crossed, back downstairs in his zip-up hoody, stethoscope hung around his neck, forcing some intern to sit down beside a patient’s bedside and avoiding Gloria and her patient satisfaction scores.

Jack doesn’t care how long it takes. He knows it will happen.

After Massey leaves, Jack drops back down into his chair. Robby’s hand reaches out immediately and Jack links their fingers back together without argument. He surprises himself by bringing Robby’s hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to the back of it.

“You look like shit,” Robby says, his voice a little stronger than before.

Jack barks out a laugh. A real laugh that fills his whole chest.

That’s his Robby: offering a foul-mouthed comment immediately after waking from a coma.

“You’re one to fucking talk,” he replies.

Jack Abbot starts breathing again at exactly 12:43 pm.

'Cause I can't breathe around you anyway

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